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Saudi Reaction to Growing Moderate Coalition [] 25X1

Summary

Saudi Arabia favors the strengthening and coalescing of moderate Arab forces, but its support for a moderate alliance would be low-key and tempered by Syrian intimidation. If such a coalition actively promoted a major peace initiative rejected by Syria, we believe Riyadh would serve as the link between moderate and radical players and urge both sides to compromise. Saudi Arabia would not publicly associate itself with the initiative, however, and its ability or willingness to influence events would be limited. [] 25X1

The Scene

The re-establishment of relations between Jordan and Egypt, the meeting of the Palestine National Council despite Syrian objections, and recent moderation in Iraqi foreign policies fuel speculation that a moderate Arab coalition is emerging. An alliance of these states and Arafat's forces could remain amorphous and cooperate only on overlapping regional interests, or could develop into an activist coalition that pushes or backs a regional peace initiative. In either case, the question of Saudi involvement and support will be crucial. [] 25X1

This paper was prepared by [] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA, [] 25X1

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Riyadh's Role

Saudi Arabia would view favorably the strengthening of moderate forces in the region and the weakening of Syrian influence. Riyadh, in our view, fits in comfortably with the amorphous group of Arab moderates that already share the following goals:

- A commitment to support Iraq in its war with Iran.
- Support for the moderate camp of the PLO, currently led by Arafat.
- A steady reintegration of Egypt into the Arab mainstream and Arab organizations. The Saudis are not out front on this issue, however, in the absence of Arab League consensus. []

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If this tacit, moderate alliance continues to move quietly on these issues, we believe Riyadh will play a positive, but backstage, role. If such a coalition grows closer and takes a higher public profile, however, Riyadh probably will calculate that its security interests are better served and protected by maintaining its distance from the group, at least in public. []

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Syrian opposition to a cohesive, moderate coalition would be the principal impediment to Riyadh's open participation. The Saudis probably would calculate that they would be the most vulnerable member of the coalition to the heavy-handed pressure tactics of the Syrians and other radicals. Crown Prince Abdallah stated to the US ambassador in Riyadh last week that Syria must be made a part of any peace effort. The Saudis probably fear that an active moderate coalition would prompt Syria to apply direct pressure on Riyadh, cause trouble in Lebanon, and increase its cooperation with Tehran and the Soviet Union. []

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The Saudis also would be concerned that their financial assets might be the object of manipulation by other members of such a coalition. Already cautious about doling out aid to their Arab allies because of lower oil revenues, the Saudis would expect members of the alliance to rely on Riyadh for the financial wherewithal to achieve political objectives. []

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There are other aspects of an Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis that would cause apprehension in Riyadh. The Saudis do not favor the formation of formal regional alliances because the mercurial nature of Middle East

politics can quickly turn allies into enemies. Riyadh sees itself surrounded by regional superpowers--Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Iran--and protects its interests by working to ensure that an effective counterweight exists to any one or combination of these states. If an Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis should form, Riyadh might even try to strengthen Syria in order to balance the Middle East equation. []

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Implications for the US

The United States could expect the Saudis to quietly encourage the moderates to proceed cautiously with a peace initiative, subtly argue the moderate case to the Syrians, urge both sides to compromise, and serve as the link between moderate and radical players. Saudi Arabia might also offer financial inducements to the radicals for a moderation of their positions but would not be willing to "punish" radicals by threatening a cutoff of aid. []

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Saudi Arabia realizes that it would be subject to criticism in the United States for its unwillingness to join a moderate front, and that this could be used destructively by opponents of advanced US weapons sales to Riyadh. Because they pay cash for major weapons, however, the Saudis do not feel obliged to link political issues with weapons sales. Although the Saudis try to limit potential negative fallout from their foreign policy positions, Riyadh would not, in our view, be willing to substantially alter its stand on any important regional issue in exchange for more F-15s. []

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The Saudis, however, could take steps to enhance their image in the United States, perhaps by publicly reiterating their commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, providing high profile financial assistance to the IMF or countries allied with the United States, or underscoring their efforts to stem Soviet encroachment in the region. []

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SUBJECT: Saudi Reaction to Growing Moderate Coalition

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